

Sermon for the 1st Sunday in Advent, 2007
Matthew 24:37-44

It is Advent. We were beginning to get just a little bored with the long pilgrimage of Pentecost; but now it is Advent. We think of it as a warm-up exercise for Christmas. Certainly the signs are there. Next Saturday we “green the church.” The streets are already ahead of us. The lights are up on the lamp-posts and the big tree has been lighted for more than a week, now. But for us, for the church, this first Sunday takes on a deeper resonance and a more somber color. The tones are the diapasons of a great organ, not the piping of a carol. There is a majesty and a power And a glory in it; but there is also a fear and trembling; for the season anticipates not only the arrival of the Incarnate Christ as a vulnerable baby; but also his coming again in glory and in judgment. Advent brings with it an awesome mixture of power and majesty and glory against that background of darkness and fear and trembling in the presence of an awesome majesty.

Oh, sure! We’ve heard it all before. We say we believe it. We enjoy the repetition of the familiar liturgical drama, largely unaware that it’s really about us. The larger drama of the year is repeated in every service: Thy Kingdom come! Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. But familiarity tends to breed, not contempt, but an acceptance as ordinary what really is earth shaking. That is where today’s Gospel lesson is headed. He spoke about the coming of the Son of Man. He declared God’s reign at the end of human history. Jesus described the people of Noah’s time, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, going about the ordinary business of living. He didn’t condemn them. Eating and drinking were not gluttony. Marriage were not lust. Jesus didn’t condemn them. The people were simply going on with normal routines, not reading the signs of the time -- content to conduct business as usual, not recognizing the tsunami that was about to overwhelm them.

So it was with the generation that Jesus was speaking to in the days of his flesh -- and so it is with our own generation and all the generations that have passed between then and now. We are seduced and blinded by what is ordinary and familiar and comfortable. And when the cataclysm overtakes us, we are not prepared to meet it.

There is a sense in which every human life reflects the course of history itself. There is a beginning and an end. There are tranquil intervals, there are diversions and disturbances, and sometimes there are shattering upheavals. So it is with all of human history, so it is with every life. There is Alpha and Omega. Christ will come again. We know that history will come to an end, and with it all human aspirations. When we do not know. That was at the heart of Jesus’ warning. It is a grim warning; the clouds cover, sun and moon do not shine -- but in all of that grimness, there is also the intimation of glory. That is the mysterious ambivalence of